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Too many watchdogs

Last year, Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, told a newspaper editors' convention that a lot of secrecy is needed if the CIA is to do its essential job properly. But, he said, that secrecy had been seriously breached by White House directives and actions of Congress in the 1970s — moves made after the CIA came into disrepute during the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal.

One "for instance" he cited was the fact that the CIA now had to notify eight different Congressional committees about what it was doing or planned to do, instead of just one or two as in the past.

With so many people in on the "secrets," he asked rhetorically, how could they remain secrets for long?

Turner's worries obviously were valid. Just how valid was proved again recently.

Former CIA agent David Barnett, arrested for selling secrets to the Russians, was being urged by his Soviet contacts to get closer to sources of U.S. intelligence by hiring on as a staff member of one of the Congressional intelligence committees.

He wasn't hired, but the Soviet KGB obviously recognizes that the Congressional demand for more oversight of secret intelligence work — that legacy of Vietnam and Watergate traumas — has created new opportunities for espionage.

That big mistake is only now being rectified. A bill just signed by President Carter backs away from the reckless reaction of the 1970s and limits CIA oversight to one committee in each house of Congress.

What is clearly shown is that too many intelligence watchdogs can be as dangerous as not having any.